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Evaluation of Mississippi Quality Stars Program

Presentation of Results

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Overview

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Background

- May 2014 Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of Early Childhood Care and Development contracted with Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) to evaluate Mississippi's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)
- Evaluation goal to examine the policies, processes, and implementation of the Mississippi Quality Stars QRIS system, a building block 5-level tiered system.
- Quality Stars is a statewide voluntary system whose stated goal is “to improve and communicate the level of quality in licensed child care and educational settings across the state.”
- Approximately 38% of eligible centers participating as of 2015 (Early Childhood Institute website, 2015)



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Background, continued

Mississippi's tiered rating system was designed to evaluate quality in child care facilities through assessment in five areas:

1. Program administration
2. Learning environments
3. Staff development
4. Parent involvement
5. Evaluation



Research Questions

- What is the conceptual framework for Quality Stars? What evidence is used to support the Quality Stars indicators?
- What critical aspects of early care and education do early childhood educators think are needed to improve program quality? What aspects are most critical for children's school readiness? How are they aligned within Quality Stars?



Research Questions, continued

- What supports are needed to improve the quality of programs participating in Quality Stars (e.g., TA, consultation, coaching, materials)? Is there evidence of program improvement and factors associated with improvement?
- What structures and supports are needed to professionalize and retain early childhood educators (e.g., compensation)?



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Research Questions, continued

- What supports and trainings are needed to improve program leadership and management?
- How can parents be more engaged in advocating, supporting, and selecting high quality early education programs?



Methods

- Documents describing Quality Stars and the QRIS Compendium reviewed to obtain detailed information about QRIS & to compare and contrast Quality Stars with QRISs nationally
- Administrative data on program ratings, Environment Rating Scales, and program characteristics, including enrollment, location, and number of subsidy slots



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Methods: Focus Groups

- Provider focus groups
 - 4 focus groups with Quality Stars participating providers in the Central, Coastal, Delta, and Northeast regions (n = 52 total)
 - 55% African American, 33% White
 - Average star rating of 2.9 (7 rated as 1 star, 14 as 2 stars, 14 as 3 stars, 11 as 4 stars, and 4 as 5 stars)
 - 2 focus groups with non-participating providers in the Central and Delta regions (n = 13 total)
 - 54% African American, 23% White, and 15% Latino/Hispanic
- Parent focus groups
 - 4 focus groups proposed and 2 completed in Central and Delta regions (n = 16 total)
 - 63% African American 19% White, and 18% multi-racial



Focus Groups Methods, continued

- Conducted in January of 2015
- Lasted on average an hour and thirty minutes
- Gift cards for participation
- Audio-recordings were transcribed and the transcripts coded by research team



Methods: Web Surveys

- Allow participation of providers unable to attend focus groups
- Questions same as those used for focus groups
- Separate, similar web survey for Pre-K providers
- Largely female respondents serving a high percentage of low-income families (61% in child care & 85% in Pre-K)
- Child care participants: 61% African American and 39% White (n=148)
- Pre-K participants: 42% African American and 58% White (n=80)
- Half of the child care respondents participated in Quality Stars



Methods: Data Analysis

- Focus group data transcribed by a professional transcription company analyzed using inductive process
- Administrative data analyzed using statistical software
- Frequencies and means to examine ERS scores, star ratings, and Quality Stars indicators
- Examined changes in ratings over time and categorized the resulting patterns
- Examined whether ratings differed by program characteristics (e.g., proportion of subsidized children, region, enrollment)



Results: National Comparisons

- Rating Structure – 3 typical methods
 - 1) *A block approach*
 - 2) *A points system*
 - 3) *A combination* of the block and points approaches (also known as hybrid)
- 37% block, 26% point, and 37% hybrids
- From 2010 to '14, hybrid and point structures grew in popularity
- Block structures generally provide greater challenges to rating improvement
- In point or hybrid structures, incremental improvements can lead to rating changes.



QRIS Components

| Component | In Mississippi's QRIS | Percentage of QRIS in 2014 |
|--|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Professional Development | YES | 100% |
| Learning Environments | YES | 93% |
| Parent Involvement | YES | 93% |
| Administrative Policy | YES | 85% |
| Evaluation | YES | NA* |
| Curriculum | NO | 78% |
| Health and Safety | NO | 63% |
| Ratio and Group Size | NO | 60% |
| Child Assessment** | NO | 55% |
| Accreditation | NO | 53% |
| Provisions for Children with Special Needs | NO | 50% |
| Continuous Quality Improvement | NO | 50% |
| Interactions | NO | 48% |
| Community Involvement | NO | 40% |
| Cultural and Linguistic Diversity | NO | 33% |

*Mississippi's Evaluation component includes aspects of administration, continuous quality improvement, staff qualifications, and parent engagement.

**Mississippi's Quality Stars Learning Environments standard includes indicators related to child assessment.

Administrative Policy Features

| Category | In Mississippi's QRIS | Percentage of QRIS in 2014 |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Staff Evaluations | Yes | 58% |
| Written Operating Policies and Procedures | Yes* | 13% |
| Related Director Qualifications | Yes** | 5% |
| Paid Preparation/Planning Time | No | 5% |
| Program Administration Scale (PAS)*** | No | 5% |
| Related Director Training | Yes** | 3% |
| Written Program Philosophy | No | 3% |
| Staff Benefits (Health Insurance, Paid Leave, Salary Scale) | No | 3% |
| Financial Record-Keeping System | Yes** | 3% |
| None Listed | No | 3% |

*Center has an employee handbook at star-level 2 and above

**Director must complete "Child Care as a Business" course at star-level 3 and above

***8% of systems require PAS or BAS for family child care homes



Professional Development

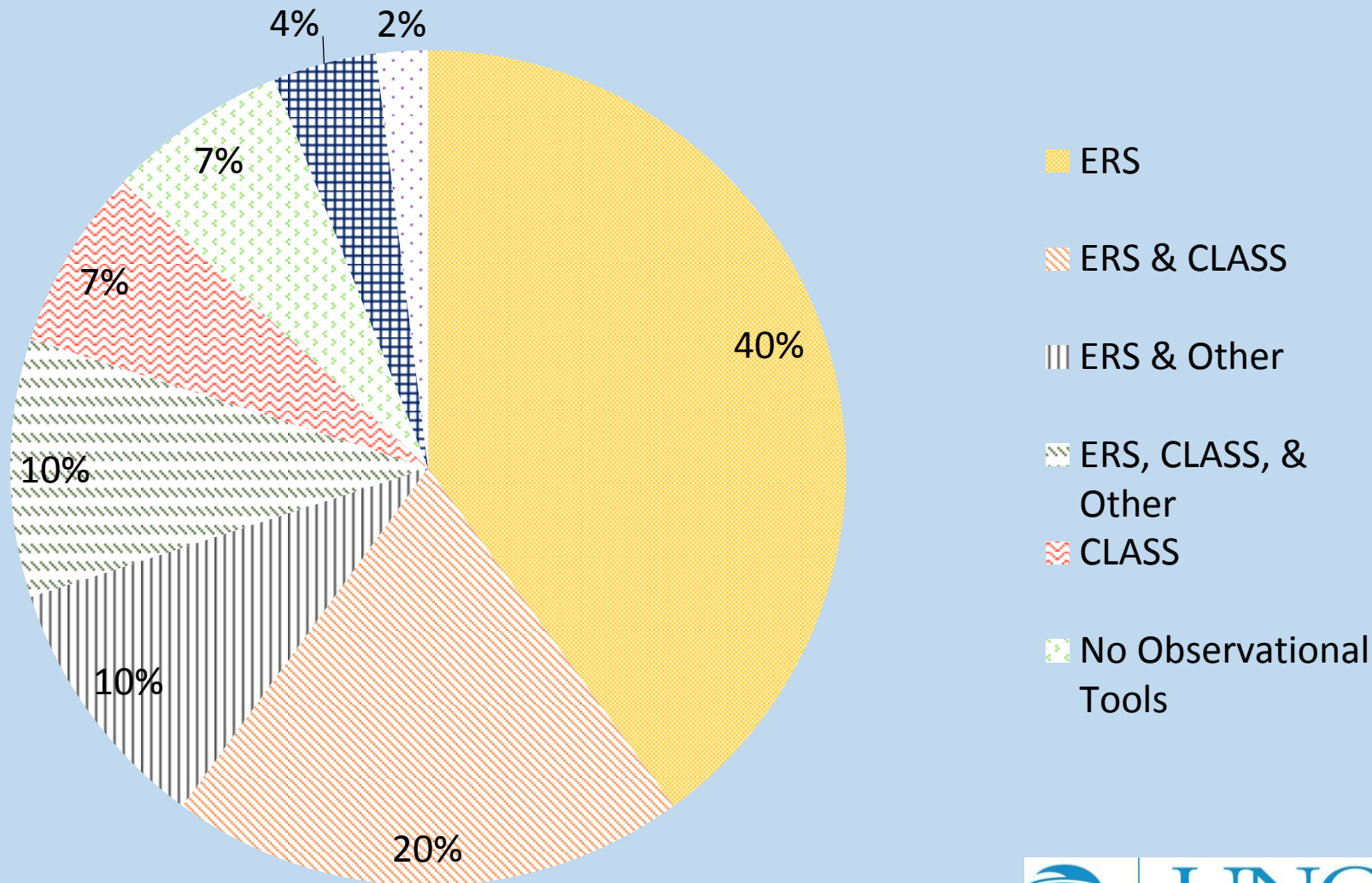
- 68% require professional development plans for directors and 76% require plans for teachers
- 57% of all systems require plans for assistant teachers
- In MS's QRIS professional development plans required for directors at 2-star and above
- Much less common are requirements for professional org memberships
 - 22% of systems require memberships for the directors
 - 18% require these for teachers
 - MS's system does not include this provision



Required Training Content

| Topic | In Mississippi's QRIS | Percentage of QRIS in 2014 |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Introduction to Environment Rating Scales (ERS) | No | 32% |
| Health and Safety | No | 32% |
| Orientation to QRIS | Yes | 29% |
| Child Development | No | 29% |
| Community/Family Involvement | No | 26% |
| Diversity | No | 26% |
| Business Practices | Yes | 24% |
| Special Needs | No | 24% |
| Nutrition | No | 21% |
| Social/Emotional Development | Yes | 21% |
| Curriculum | No | 21% |
| Child Assessment | Yes | 21% |
| Developmentally Appropriate Practices | No | 18% |
| Intro to CLASS | No | 13% |
| No Training Required | No | 8% |

Program Quality Observation Tools (n=38 QRISs)



Reassessment Periods

- Nationally, most common observation reassessment period is every 3 years (26% of systems), followed by every 2 years (24%), and then annual (16%)
- MS requires reassessment annually unless a program wants to maintain its current rating, in which case it is every 2 years

Public Awareness

- MS is among the 26% of QRISs that did not have funding dedicated to public awareness; 68% of systems had such funding



Financial Incentives

- Like MS, 37% of other QRISs awarded a quality bonus
 - 29% awarded improvement grants
 - 16% provided other financial incentives
 - 2% provided start-up awards
 - 16% provided no financial incentives
- Ten other QRISs reported using tiered reimbursement rates calculated as a percentage increase over the maximum reimbursement rate



Tiered reimbursement rates at each QRIS level (%)

| State | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Average |
|---------------|-----|-----|------|------|------|---------|
| Vermont | 5 | 10 | 20 | 30 | 40 | 21 |
| Indiana | 0 | 10 | 20 | 30 | N/A | 15 |
| Ohio | 5 | 10 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 15 |
| Mississippi | 0 | 7 | 17 | 22 | 25 | 14.2 |
| Massachusetts | 0 | 15 | 15 | 15 | 15 | 12 |
| Montana | 0 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 20 | 10 |
| Minnesota | 0 | 0 | 15 | 20 | N/A | 8.75 |
| Illinois | 0 | 0 | 10 | 15 | N/A | 6.25 |
| Georgia | 3 | 5 | 10 | N/A | N/A | 6 |
| Nevada | 0 | 0 | 6 | 9 | 12 | 5.4 |
| Wisconsin | 0 | -5 | 0 | 5 | 25 | 5 |
| Average | 1.2 | 5.2 | 12.5 | 18.1 | 23.1 | -- |



Results: Administrative Data

- Majority of programs (60.6%) were rated as a 1-Star. Less than 20% of the programs were rated at the 3-, 4- or 5-Star levels

| STAR LEVEL | PERCENT (N) |
|------------|-------------|
| 1-STAR | 60.6% (238) |
| 2-STAR | 20.6% (81) |
| 3-STAR | 10.4% (41) |
| 4-STAR | 5.3% (21) |
| 5-STAR | 3.1% (12) |



Rating Patterns

| GROUP | PERCENT (N) |
|---------------|-------------|
| INCREASING | 24% (94) |
| DECREASING | 3% (10) |
| FLUCTUATING | 21% (82) |
| CONSISTENT | 31% (122) |
| 1-STAR | 28% (110) |
| 2-STAR | 2% (7) |
| 3-STAR | 1% (4) |
| 4-STAR | 0 |
| 5-STAR | .3% (1) |
| SINGLE RATING | 22% (85) |
| 1-STAR | 18% (71) |
| 2-STAR | 3% (10) |
| 3-STAR | .8% (3) |
| 4-STAR | .3% (1) |



Environment Rating Scales

- Designed to assess process quality in an early childhood group
- Subscales: (1) Space and Furnishing, (2) Personal Care Routines, (3) Listening and Talking, (4) Activities, (5) Interaction, (6) Program Structure, and (7) Parents and Staff
- 2 classrooms assessed for Quality Stars
- Most recent observation period average ERS score was 3.18 (SD = 0.92, ranging from 1.39 to 5.75)



Environment Rating Scales

- ECERS subscale with highest score: *Language-Reasoning* (M = 3.4, SD = 1.1)
- ECERS subscale with lowest score: *Personal Care Routines* (M = 2.7, SD = .9)
- ITERS *Interaction* subscale had the highest average score (3.4, SD = 1.3)
- ITERS *Personal Care Routines* had the lowest average score (2.3, SD = 0.9)



Quality Stars Components

- At each level minimum ERS score most difficult to attain, 13% of those applying for 2-stars, 9% for 3-stars, 25% for 4-stars, & 8% for 5-stars
- For those applying for 3-stars staff training also hard to achieve (23% met indicator)
- Meeting the MS Early Learning Guidelines Teacher Training indicator was difficult for those applying for 4-stars (25% met indicator)
- Kindergarten Transition Plan, Staff Development, MS Early Learning Guidelines, Child Assessment, and Parent and Teacher Conferences all difficult for those applying for 5 stars



Correlations between Indicators and Ratings

- 2 Stars: ERS scores were the most highly correlated (.66)
- 3 Stars: Most strongly related were ERS scores, the Child Development Associate Credential, & Family Communication: Weekly Notes (correlations above .7)
- 4 Stars: Most highly correlated are Staff Development: Teachers – 20 and 10 hours, Mississippi Early Learning Guidelines Teacher Training, & ERS scores (.72)
- 5 Stars: Highest correlations were Staff Development – 25 hours, Mississippi Early Learning Guidelines, & Developmental Checklists (correlations over .6)



Results: Parent and Provider Focus Groups & Provider Surveys



Parent Focus Groups

- Aspects of Quality

- Quality of staff was the most commonly mentioned
- Curriculum, school readiness, opportunities for socialization, and classroom materials also highlighted as important
- Ratios & group size:

“Something important to me would be like the ratio, like I feel that my child isn’t is not too many kids in there, so my child is being watched, is not too much for the teacher and I don’t have to worry about that.”



Parent Focus Groups, continued

- More than half not aware of their program's Quality Star rating but had heard of system
- Parents generally had positive perceptions about a system like Quality Stars as a support for quality improvement

“I think it’s good because they come in and can kind of help train the staff, show them if they’re doing stuff right, show them curriculum to do.”



Parent Focus Groups, continued

- Ways to improve the Mississippi Quality Stars program
 - Parents in both groups suggested that it be made mandatory
 - Second most common suggestion was to have surprise monitoring visits, rather than announced visits
 - Align Quality Stars with school readiness indicators so that children are prepared for kindergarten



Parent Focus Groups, continued

- Make trainings available to parents

“I do agree like if the classes are opened to the parents it would be a good idea because I would understand okay why this center is doing what they are doing for my child and understand why they are doing this, I don’t really have to question anything and it just helps parents understand that child more, and not just hearing it from the person that is watching your child, you hear it from somebody who is a professional in that field.”



Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Reasons for Participating

- Most common: Financial incentives, including increased subsidy rate and provision of materials

“I got involved because it was the only money that was circulating and I would not be in it now had it not been for Allies that bought all that stuff and they bought close to \$100,000 worth of stuff for my center, made me a center.”



Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Reasons for Participating

- Second most common: Program Improvement

“I enrolled in the program because I wanted an opportunity to increase the quality of care that I was offering for my children and for my families. I wanted to be able to be knowledgeable about the best practices. I wanted the information for my teachers, I wanted to grow them professionally.”

- Other: marketing tools, perceived as mandatory
- Similar reasons for survey respondents



Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Benefits of Participating

- Most common: Increased funding through subsidies and provision of materials for their programs

“...they brought material in and not only did they bring it in, they taught the teachers how to use it, how to interact with the children and it was an all around experience.”



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Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Benefits of Participating

- Other: improved quality with better interactions with children, spoke more with children, and allowed more child choice because of what they had learned through Quality Stars
- Some providers noted better center climate and less staff turnover
- Survey respondents expressed similar reasons: quality improvement, TA, increased funding through subsidies, and provision of materials most commonly reported benefits



Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Challenges and Areas for Improvement

- The biggest challenge: cost
- Concerns about ERS: too focused on environment/hand washing, standards for scores too high, too influential in overall ratings



Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Challenges and Areas for Improvement

- Concerns about the qualifications, inconsistency, and subjectivity of the raters; process stressful, focused on weaknesses rather than improvement

“I was a three star and the next time my evaluation came up, I was knocked down to a two star and my lead teacher the day of the evaluation when the evaluator left, my lead teacher walked out. Didn’t give me two weeks’ notice, three weeks’ notice, she said ‘Miss X, I’m finished. I’m going somewhere else.’ When you lose your star person on a preschool staff, you have really lost something.”



Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Challenges and Areas for Improvement, continued

- Weighting all indicators equally not appropriate
- TA options limited and inaccessible
- Issues about communication and collaboration: providers lacked voice in decision making, received confusing guidance about program, and were not kept abreast of changes
 - Suggestions for a clear policy manual for the program, with clear guidelines about standards
- Survey respondents voiced similar challenges, including difficulty related to training opportunities and inconsistency in the rating process



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Non-Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Perceptions of Quality and Quality Stars

- Quality defined as “school readiness,” although not specific
- Well-balanced curriculum: opportunities for hands-on learning, learning through play, outdoor learning, science, and computer technology, supports for children’s communication and language
- Nutrition, health, and safety
- Teacher qualifications



Non-Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Perceptions of Quality and Quality Stars

- Family engagement, including respect for children/families and parent education
- A mechanism for combating poverty/matter of equity (one focus group)
- Quality Stars viewed as a way to get free classroom materials
- Quality Stars viewed as environmental quality, missing other components that are important



Non-Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Barriers to Participation

- Lack of trust; misled when they were told that they would be rated a 1 star for enrolling
- Quality Stars as non-competitively awarded funding for academic institutions rather than for quality improvement

“All of our funding from this state is going to organizations who administer. It is not getting to our children who need it. Our state wastes so much money.”

- Duplication in effort across TA providers; “so many programs are doing the same thing”
- Community provider slots will be supplanted by public school slots



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Non-Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Barriers to Participation

- Suspicion about Quality Stars participation rates listed on the website
- Lack of collaboration by the state, lack of transparency in program outcome data
- Questions about how money spent relative to numbers of programs rated 3, 4, and 5 stars and numbers of children served by these programs, particularly children of color and children from low-income families
- Deep-seated issues about racial biases emerged during the focus groups



Non-Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Barriers to Participation, continued

- Costs: need to pay quality teachers; teachers stay until they get their training then leave for higher pay; reimbursement rates too low to sustain high quality; star rating fluctuations mean reimbursement rates fluctuate, difficult to plan budgets with erratic funding; lack of funding to support quality in the state as a whole
- System as punitive and not building on strengths
- Concerns about the ERS: too focused on handwashing, lack of cultural competence, a perceived lack of association with school readiness; concerns with training and qualifications of the raters



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Non-Participating Provider Focus Groups and Surveys: Barriers to Participation, continued

- Need for more training and TA opportunities; specific training to prepare staff for the rating process
- Need a greater focus on school readiness and upfront grants to programs to help improve quality before being rated
- Need a wholesale change; “go back to the drawing board and find some new people that can put it together.”
- Survey respondent barriers included wanting more information, disagreeing with program philosophies, and questioning the integrity of the implementation process



Pre-K Provider Survey

- MS Department of Education should provide TA for the Early Learning Standards and the MS Early Childhood Guidelines
- Teacher-child interactions and professional development rated as the most important quality aspects of early care and education settings
- While rated as highly important, providers did not agree as strongly that programs should be held to minimum standards related to these elements
- Professional development should be aligned (e.g., with Foundations, MS Early Learning and Development Standards, role, core knowledge and skills, PD plans) and CEU bearing



Pre-K Provider Survey, continued

- Teachers should be required to participate in professional development across a variety of topics
- Programs should be allowed to make improvements and be re-assessed after an initial rating
- All staff (administrators, leads, assistants) should have PD plans, especially administrators and lead teachers



Conclusions



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Design: Ideas for Consideration

- Develop clarity and cross-sector consensus about QRIS goals and the activities and supports needed to attain them
- Examine other rating structures to determine whether the block model is best for the state
- Ensure that all sectors are included in QRIS advisory and redesign groups, and that the sectors are meaningfully integrated in the administration and oversight of the QRIS at the state, and as appropriate, local levels
- Conduct a cross-walk of standards between the QRIS, licensure/Health Department, Head Start, Pre-K, and other related programs (e.g., NAEYC) to determine what improvements might be made in alignment



Standards: Ideas for Consideration

- Consider the feasibility of requiring peer mentorship, particularly in more rural settings
- Examine whether indicators currently in the Evaluation standard might be folded into other areas to align more closely with other state systems
- Consider awarding bonus quality points for additional staff education or training if a point or hybrid system is adopted
- Consider requiring some of the other common training topics, including Introduction to ERS and Health and Safety



Standards: Ideas for Consideration, continued

- Reconsider requiring parent participation in a block system as it may prove to be challenging and feasibility is contingent upon the actions of current parents
- Consider examining the newly developed *Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality* measure to assess the quality of families and provider relationships
- Consider adding curriculum to QRIS standards



Measures: Ideas for Consideration

- Consider whether the new ECERS-3 and/or CLASS should be included as measures of quality



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Implementation: Ideas for Consideration

- Consider extending the reassessment period to every 2 or 3 years
- Consider differential monitoring, e.g., rating higher star programs less frequently than lower quality programs, to allow resources to go to quality improvement efforts
- Technical assistance services might be targeted to the programs that are fluctuating to help them to increase their ratings or at least remain at a consistent rating



Implementation: Ideas for Consideration, continued

- Adopting a strengths-based approach to implementing the system may assist with quality improvement efforts (the “I” in QRIS) and may improve relationships with providers
- Consider having TA contracts that specify numbers of programs that must improve over time, rather than solely numbers of programs served, to encourage greater quality improvement



Training and Technical Assistance: Ideas for Consideration

- Target TA toward areas with the lowest ERS scores
- Consider whether training items in the Learning Environment component might be included in Professional Development for consistency and to avoid duplication
- Use feedback to better schedule training opportunities
- Consider expanding training and TA to meet the needs of providers



Communication: Ideas for Consideration

- Improve communications and transparency with child care providers about the system
- Information about the qualifications of raters and a clearly defined grievance process should be more easily locatable on websites
- Better communicate the research base undergirding Quality Stars so that providers understand the importance of the standards included in the system
- Include all Quality Stars policies and procedures (e.g., conceptual model, rating processes, how subcontractors are selected) on the website for transparency



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Funding: Ideas for Consideration

- Maintain reimbursement levels to encourage quality improvement
- Assess how additional funding may be better targeted for quality improvement efforts
- Assess and inform programs on creative, low-cost ways to improve quality
- Have a clear understanding of how much is spent on R (rating) and how much is spent on I (improvement)
- Consider having a Financing Task Force as part of the revisions process to work on getting more money into the system for programs



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Questions?

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